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A COMMENT ON MILTON'S *HISTORY OF BRITAIN*

Milton's theory of the distinction between liberty and license is conspicuous in his philosophy; it recurs again and again in his writings, for the marked Hebraic element in his nature lent itself freely to the utterance of maxim and jeremiad, of prophecy and lamentation. His abiding interest, too, in the doctrine that liberty must be guarded by temperance and virtue is, in a real sense, an aspect of his solicitude for human welfare. To become a sluggard in an hour of ease, or a voluptuary in an hour of affluence, or a tyrant in an hour of authority—these, he is convinced, are perils that never fail to beset the race of man. With the Puritan's consciousness that they are imminent in the career of an individual, he combines the scholar-poet's knowledge that all nations and ages are exposed to them. With the "great Task-Master's eye" looking upon him throughout the centuries, how is frail man withstanding the test?

In one form or another, this query always commanded a place in Milton's thought; not often, however, did it find better opportunity to present itself than in his *History of Britain*. In the three poems of his final years it is clearly manifest, and evident, though less plainly, in the early poetry. The prose writings reflect it in a measure, but no other so well as the *History*. For the productions of Milton's so-called second period, and the prose compositions of the third, were mainly polemic—tracts and treatises written to support personal or factional causes, and to disarm threatened or pending attacks. Virtually every one of them had its peculiar object, and a specific occasion. One need mention only *The Reason of Church Government* and the Smectymnuan documents in order to imagine himself in an atmosphere of special controversies and narrow issues. Even *Of Education* was the outgrowth of a current movement. In most of these writings, Milton had definite thrusts to deliver, or concrete assaults to resist. There was little scope for moral theses of broad and profound application. In the *History*, however, in which more than a thousand years of authentic records were spread before him, in which whole tribes and nations played the alternating roles of conqueror and conquered, and in which the triumph of virtue and the undoing of vice might be witnessed on a universal scale—in

such a work he could illustrate his precept without restraint. The closing paragraph,¹ with its admonition to contemporary Englishmen, goes far toward revealing the spirit in which he wrote. In the hands of a man of that contemplative, sober temper, the national annals could scarcely inspire an epic of legendary jousts and tourneys, or a glorification of towering and picturesque heroes, but prompted instead a stern warning, in unpretentious narrative, that the race protect its Heaven-sent freedom against the snares of earthly temptation.

The *History of Britain* therefore holds a unique place in the development of Milton's thought and character. To contend that the moral premises of *Paradise Lost* arose spontaneously out of it would be futile and absurd, for it is known that the project of an epic based on Adam's sin was engaging his mind as early as 1640, some five years before the composition of the *History* was actually begun. But his intense examination of the varied story of a people's fortunes, prosecuted as it was through the very period in which ideas for the master-work were germinating and flowering, must have been a powerful influence. Had Milton never undertaken a history of England, he would still have written his last three poems; yet the lesser interest surely had its effect on the eventual preservation of the greater. From the spectacle of a nation's combat with sin it was only a step to the panorama comprising humanity and the Cosmos. When, after 1655, he was somewhat free to focus his thought on the composition of *Paradise Lost*, he had finished nearly four books of the historical work. He had already meditated upon the self-imposed fate of the Britons: he was about to compare it with the similar doom of their Teutonic successors. During the following half-decade, the writing of the two works made joint claim upon his time. For over fifteen years, moreover, through violent interruptions and absorbing activities, through failing vision and total blindness, he bore them in his mind side by side. Seed-thoughts and suggestions for the one must have had their share in shaping and coloring the other.

¹The passage follows: "If these were the causes of such misery and thralldom to those our ancestors, with what better close can be concluded, than here in fit season to remember this age in the midst of her security, to fear from like vices without amendment, the revolution of like calamities?" This passage was doubtless written shortly after the Restoration.

It is presumptuous, of course, to contend that the author of the *History* is at all points the man who sang the strains of *Paradise Lost*. The irritable, combative, and excessively subjective nature gave way, in the presence of a divine theme, to the tranquil seer. Yet in both there is the same search after moral truth, the same endeavor to know the spiritual worth of human character, and its final hope in the conflict with temptation; and there is the same high purpose to

justify the ways of God to men.

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KEATS'S ODE TO THE NIGHTINGALE

The revival of interest in Keats with the centennial of his death has brought out much interesting new material, but nothing of more value than that on the *Ode to the Nightingale*. Sir Sidney Colvin's publication of a facsimile of the manuscript of the poem, the property of the Marquis of Crewe, has furnished an invaluable addition to the materials for the study of this poem, acknowledged to be one of the poet's greatest.

The facsimile shows that Brown's "four or five" scraps of paper upon which he said the poem was written are in reality only two scraps, but with four pages, and also disposes of any lingering doubt about the proper arrangement of the stanzas. This enables us now to speak more confidently about both the thought and imagery of the poem, and to see it as a consistent whole, which up to the present has been somewhat uncertain.

In the matter of the imagery of the poem, it needs to be noticed that there are two and only two distinct images, though this has not been noticed by students of Keats generally. The first and last stanzas, though clearly introductory and concluding in their thought, do not constitute separate images.

The first image of the poem is that of the actual conditions under which Keats composed the poem, transferred directly and only made more vivid by his creative imagination. The poet, as